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The Masterpiece
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Reviews of the Season's Books

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The Masterpiece of a Demigod

The Story of the Recent Amazing Discovery of the First Stone Building in the World

By Dr. George A. Reisner

AS a result of the discovery of the funerary temple of King Zoser of Dynasty III who reigned as king in Upper and Lower Egypt about 3100 B.C., every book on Egyptian architecture and art is rendered obsolete and will have to be rewritten. This discovery, the most important historically made in Egypt since the war, not only discloses the earliest stone building known to man, built with an elaboration of beautiful architectural detail far in advance of anything known to have existed at that time or for ten centuries afterwards, but it also solves a fascinating mystery of human personality, and reveals to us and identifies a really great creative artist who lived and worked almost 5,000 years ago.

For years Egyptologists have known something of the history of Imhotep — now for the first time definitely recognized as the architect of the Temple of Zoser. His name has sifted down through the long history of Egypt as an historical character, “the chief lector-priest, the learned man, the architect of the king in Upper and Lower Egypt,” as a legendary, mythical figure, and at the last as a demigod, worshiped by kings. Attention was first drawn to him by texts of the Ptolemaic period in which he appears in his last form, as a demigod whom the Greeks identified with Asklepios, the healer.

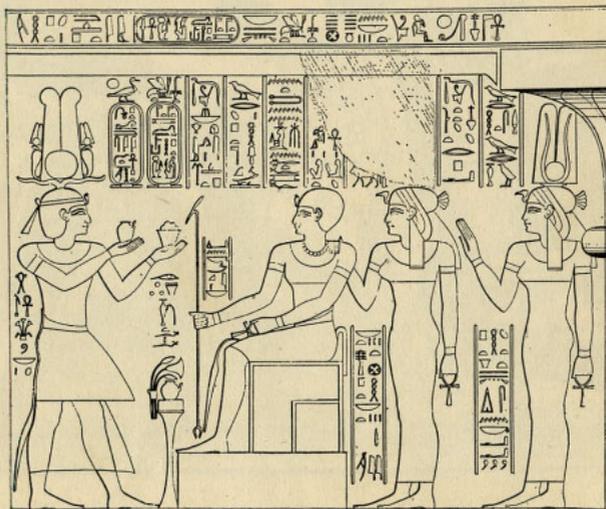
On the Island of Philæ, in front of the great pylon of the Temple of Isis, there stands a small chapel on the walls of which Imhotep is represented as a god receiving offerings from the king, Ptolemy V, Epiphanes. He appears also on the walls of a chapel at Karnak in a relief of Ptolemy

Dr. Reisner, the foremost Egyptologist in America today, and chief of the Harvard University-Boston Museum Expedition which recently reported the important discovery of an intact tomb of the Fourth Dynasty, has received the cabled permission of the Egyptian Government to tell the amazing tale unfolded here — the story of the first stone building in the world, the Temple of Zoser, and of that mysterious Imhotep, now identified for the first time as the temple's creative genius. The story coming from the excavations pushes back the history of architecture, step by step, until its beginnings are found — here.

IV, Philopater, and at Medinet Habu with Ptolemy IX, Euergetes II. Priests of the god Imhotep are known, and a number of bronze figures which were probably votive offerings to him. Every scribe when preparing to write poured out a libation from his waterpot to Imhotep, and at the end of his manuscript he added the words,

Iu-w-m-hotep, “It is finished in peace” — a play on the name of the “learned Imhotep.” In a monograph on Imhotep, as Asklepios, published in 1902, Professor Sethe of Berlin showed that Imhotep was a deified man who had lived in the reign of Zoser, who had the reputation of being a learned scribe, a poet, an engineer, but above all things, a physician who, in the words of Ptolemy IV, “comes to whomever calls him and gives life to all men and women.” His deification dates only from the reign of Amasis, about 550 B.C., and even in that reign he was still known as a man who had once lived on earth and indeed as a master architect, for an architect of Amasis traces his descent through twenty generations to an architect of Dynasty XIX and claims that this ancestor was directly descended from Imhotep, the master architect of King

Zoser. A poem called “the song from the house of King Yentef,” written about 2000 B.C., speaks of *the man* Imhotep as follows: “The old gods (that is, the kings) rest in their pyramids, the nobles and the common people likewise are buried in their tombs. Those who have built themselves houses have no abiding place now. What has happened to them? I have heard the words of Imhotep and of Hordedef, of whom men still speak much. But



Drawing of a relief in the chapel of the deified Imhotep at Philæ

where are their funerary chapels? The walls are fallen: they (these men) have no chapels any more: they are as if they had never existed. No one has returned from the world of the dead to tell about them and their condition. . . ."

There is in Berlin an ancient papyrus roll written in the Hyksos period (about 1700 B.C.) which contains a story probably composed in Dynasty V. The point of the story is the origin of the kings in Dynasty V as sons of the god Ra, but it begins with three tales of magical enchantments related to King Cheops by his sons. One tells of the magical crocodile of Weba-yener, the chief lector-priest of King Nebka (Dynasty III); another relates how the chief lector Zazamankh divided the waters of a pond (like Moses) for King Sneferuw; and a third gave a tale which is lost of an enchantment worked for King Zoser by his chief lector-priest, who was undoubtedly our Imhotep.

There is one final record of King Zoser and Imhotep inscribed on the rocks of the Island of Sehel at the First Cataract. The inscription is probably of the Ptolemaic period and was made to confirm the claim of the priests of Philæ to the "Twelve-mile land" just south of the cataract, but Professor Sethe believes very reasonably that the inscription was based on ancient documents. The inscription relates that in the time of Zoser, the water of the Nile was low for seven years and Egypt suffered from famine. Zoser consulted Imhotep who, having read the ancient rolls, instructed the king concerning the cataract gods and advised

him to make sacrifices to them as controllers of the Nile. We know, of course, that his information in regard to the Nile waters was wrong, but the sacrifices cured the evil, and Zoser in gratitude presented the "Twelve-mile land" to the temples of the gods of the cataract.

But with all this, the high consideration paid to Imhotep has remained unexplained. He was certainly a notable man, a royal scribe among scribes, a magician of the lector-priests, a physician, apparently a poet, and an architect. He was deified by the Ptolemies as were a few other notable men of the period of Egyptian imperial power. But he remained in the minds of modern scholars an obscure and almost mythical figure whose very existence as a man had been disputed by some of them. The discovery of the Temple of Zoser has brought him before us, however, in his true and highest function as the chief architect of King Zoser. The temple was still visible during the period of the New Kingdom and probably until much later. Scribes and architects visited it as a model of construction and of form. On the walls are found a number of the graffiti written by these pilgrims of the New Kingdom recording their visits to the "beautiful Temple of Zoser" which every scribe in Egypt must have known to be the work of Imhotep, the great architect and scribe of Zoser's reign. And when one beholds the great plan of the temple, the rich architectural details and the beautiful technique which he taught his masons, and realizes that this is the first building in the



In the "beautiful Temple of Zoser." View of two of the great courts seen from the Step Pyramid with ruins of two later pyramids in the background. The ground around these gives an idea of the appearance of unexcavated areas

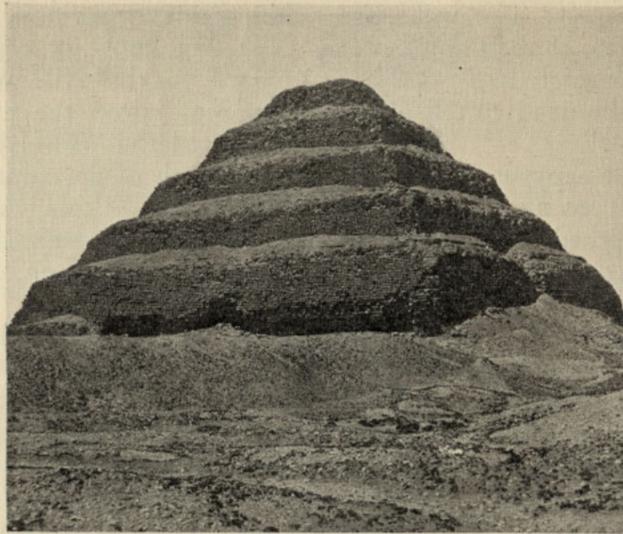
world built of hewn stone, the man Imhotep comes into his own again, as a great creative architect living once more after five thousand years through that which his brain conceived and his authority brought into being.

The tomb of King Zoser is the famous Step Pyramid at Saqqarah, the ancient necropolis of Memphis, which lies about ten miles south of the Giza Pyramids. This great field has been reserved by the Department of Antiquities since the days of Mariette, the first director general. About 1904, the Egyptian Government resumed excavation of the necropolis under the direction of Mr. J. E. Quibell, then a chief inspector. Just before the war, he was succeeded by Mr. C. M. Firth, an Oxford man like Mr. Quibell and a former member of the Harvard-Boston Expedition (1906-1909). After the war, Mr. Firth reopened the works at Saqqarah, and in the spring of 1924 began clearing the northeastern quarter of the great walled enclosure in which stands the Step Pyramid. He was assisted by a Harvard man, Mr. Dows Dunham, also a former member of the Harvard-Boston Expedition (1919-1923).

ALMOST immediately they came on a complex of chapels of remarkable masonry and such unexpected architectural details that travelers, seeing the channeled columns, repeatedly turned away saying that it was a Greek temple. It is the oldest known stone building in the world, two thousand years older than the earliest form of the Temple of Hera at Olympia which had wooden columns.

The archæological evidence of the date of the Zoser Temple was already clear in April, 1924, and fully supported by the structural connection with the Step Pyramid, which in turn bore the name of Zoser inscribed several times on the walls of the burial chambers. Finally, after the summer of 1924, when excavations were resumed, a statue of Zoser inscribed with his name and title was found in a subsidiary chapel. The work is still going on, and nearly one half of the area within the enclosure remains to be excavated.

I had the great pleasure of visiting the temple several times in April of last year, immediately after the discovery. When the statue of Zoser was found, a message from Mr. Firth reached me just after breakfast. Four of us piled into our Ford and



A king's tomb. The famous Step Pyramid of King Zoser, Dynasty III (about 3100 B.C.)

arrived at the Step Pyramid in time to see the uncovering of the lower part of the statue. We drove along the canal bank beside the inundated fields, not over the desert. And the Sunday before I left Egypt (January 21) I paid a final visit, going through the passages in the pyramid with Firth and Dunham. "The beautiful Temple of Zoser," as later Egyptian visitors called it, remains one of the most vivid memories which I have brought away from my twenty-eight years in Egypt.

You are to think of the Step Pyramid rising in stages, not rough as it appeared before these excavations, but cased in beautiful smooth masonry of hard white limestone like the cap still left on the top of the Pyramid of Chephren at Giza. The pyramid is 110 by 110 yards square and the great enclosing wall around it, also cased in fine white limestone, was 260 by 260 yards square. The space between the pyramid and the enclosing wall, measuring about 50,000 square yards, is occupied by a complex of courts all of similar form, each containing two or three chapels. Each chapel stood in front of a mass of masonry which contained a square shaft leading to a burial chamber underground. It is clear that these were burial places of members of the family and of the court of Zoser. They correspond to the cemeteries of mastaba tombs attached to the Pyramids of Giza and to the complex of mud-brick graves which surround the tombs of the kings of Dynasty I at Abydos. To go further back, they are probably a survival from predynastic times when wives and slaves were buried in the same grave with the family head. North of the middle of the pyramid, a stairway descending in the rock gives access to the burial chamber, and over the stairway, a benchlike mass of masonry has been built which bears another chapel of different plan, but with architectural details like those of the adjoining courts. A winding inclined plane leads up from the lower northeastern quarter to the northern chapel.

NEAR the northeastern corner of the great pile a cell has been built against the pyramid and in this stood the statue of Zoser, facing two holes in the north wall. The cell was surrounded by a small chapel, the doors of which were built of masonry and stood open so that the soul of Zoser might not be prevented from "going to and fro



A king god. The ka statue of King Zoser, representing him as the king of Upper and Lower Egypt, and as the god Ra. Compare with statue of Mycerinus below

as he willed." From his place in the cell, the *ka* of Zoser looked forth into the largest of the courts. And all the doors of the chapels were also open, carved in the masonry so that the *ka* might have free access to every part of the building. The statue is a *ka* statue in the truest sense—that is, it represents King Zoser as the god Ra with the insignia of the earthly kingship over Egypt; and it bears the characteristic marks of the two royal statuettes previously known of this period. The throne represents the old wooden throne; the garment is a sheet wrapped around the body leaving the top of the shoulders exposed and falling to the ankles; the right arm crosses the breast, the right hand grasps the edge of the sheet, and the left hand lies open, palm down, on the left knee. On the head is the divine wig of Ra, falling in two lappets over the shoulders and in a broad lappet down the back. Over the divine wig is placed the plaited headdress of the king of Upper and Lower Egypt, but in a curious form with pointed instead of rounded lappets. The figure is thus represented as king and as god. As a god, he was to sail the heavens in the boat of Ra every day, and it may be presumed that somewhere in the enclosure is a boat grave like those discovered last winter at Giza around the Pyramid of Cheops. This curious statue is seen at first glance to be archaic, but tending toward the form of royal statues which was made traditional by the two sculptors who carved the

statues of Chephren and Mycerinus and founded the schools of sculpture of Dynasties V and VI. We are uncertain of the passage of time, but there were probably only one or two generations between the sculptor of the Zoser statue and the two great men of Giza.

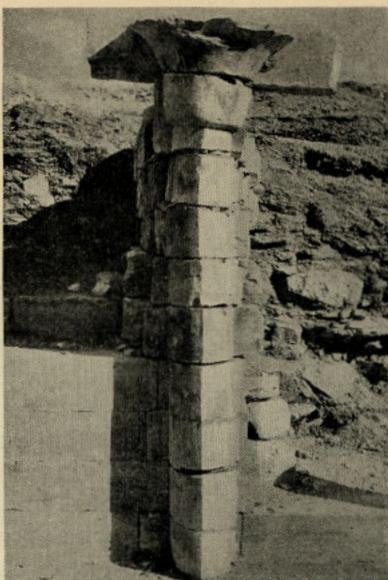
The strongest impression is made by the beautiful masonry. The blocks are of fine white limestone from Turah across the river. Those in the pyramid casing are small compared to the blocks used during Dynasty IV, and those in the walls of the chapels, still smaller. All have been "floated" on plaster of Paris and have the joints so straight and true that the fingers rubbed over the surface cannot detect the edges. The smooth outer surface is visually but not mathematically flat. The small-stone masonry appears to have been derived from the earlier brick-work, and the accessories, the jambs, the lintels, the roofs of the chambers, and the columns, are all those of crude brick architecture copied here in stone. The feature which roused the astonishment of archæologists and architects is provided by the columns—fluted or channeled columns, papyrus columns with triangular stem, and columns of the type based on the *Nymphaea caerulea* (not the true lotus). These are all engaged columns, except in one chapel where the fluted columns stand free, and all are built of masonry (not monolithic). They represent copies in masonry of the wooden



Alabaster statue of Mycerinus, showing the form invented by the sculptors of Dynasty IV and copied by the schools of Dynasty V and VI, becoming the traditional form of the seated king used by all later sculptors

columns of the older crude brick architecture, which consisted each of a single log. In Dynasties IV and V, monolithic pillars and columns had come into use in stone architecture. The roofs supported by the Zoser columns were of stone cut to imitate wooden beams covered with logs. The origin of the fluted columns, like the plant columns, probably lies in the crude brick architecture of the previous age, but is still obscure. The column has a band near the base and another near the capital and is certainly conceived as a bundle of stems. The capital is a swelling of the stem like the sheath at the joint of a reed, but inverted. In any case, there they stand in the earliest known stone building preserved to us—a thousand years before the fluted columns of Beni Hasan and twenty-three centuries older than the earliest known examples of Greek fluted columns.

This building is an amazing revelation of the genius of the Egyptians and of the rapidity with which their culture developed in Dynasties III and IV. Perhaps there is buried in the sands of Egypt some temple still older than that of Zoser, but the remains of the pyramids at Zawiat-el-Aryan of about the same period seem to indicate that no earlier funerary temple can be expected. As for the temples of the gods in the cultivated land, they were all rebuilt in later times, and nothing of the older



Papyrus column with triangular stem, which stood in front of the east chapel in the court shown below

buildings would remain. We are therefore, justified in regarding the Zoser Temple as the first really great building constructed of stone in Egypt, and Manetho the Egyptian priest who wrote a history of Egypt in the reign of Ptolemy II, states explicitly that Imhotep was the first to construct buildings of dressed stone. The Zoser Temple marks the transition from crude brick and wood to limestone masonry, while the temples of the kings of Dynasty IV at Giza present the transition from limestone to granite and basalt. But aside from the use of more massive blocks of stone and the employment of monolithic pillars and columns, the later limestone buildings hardly exceeded that of the architect of Zoser in the permanence and the beauty of its masonry.

The next point of interest to archæologists and travelers would be the discovery of the actual tomb of Imhotep. According to a Greek papyrus found at Saqqarah, this tomb was located near the Step Pyramid, and therefore probably lies within the enclosing wall. We may hope that Mr. Firth in the course of his work will uncover the actual offering chapel of this great man, so that those of us who hereafter make the pilgrimage to the "beautiful Temple of Zoser" may see with our own eyes the burial place of the first great builder in dressed and enduring stone.



Second court seen from the Step Pyramid, showing the fluted columns, resembling a Greek temple, which roused the astonishment of archæologists and architects